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Podcasts Episode 14: Erica Ihrke

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[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Hello and welcome everyone. Erica, can you hear me?

[Erica:](#) I can.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Oh, great. Well, welcome everyone to today's podcast. We have Erica Iraqui from leader dogs who's going to be talking with us about her own professional journey and experiences in the field and we just appreciate her taking some time to talk about this because she is a calm as well as a mobility, a guide dog trainer and mobility trainer. So she's going to talk to us a little bit about her life experiences, her professional experiences and then what makes leader dog such a great resource for our community. So welcome Erica. Get us started. Talk to us about who you are and how you got into this field.

[Speaker 2:](#) Sure. I have been with leader dogs for the blind for over 20 years. My journey with leader dogs started as, when I was going to college to become an elementary school teacher. And I started working on the weekends as what's now known as a resident assistant. There are team members that are on staff 24/7 and provide just that little bit of extra help that somebody might need with the normal average everyday things while they're here with us for training for a variety of our programs.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) What school was that with Erica?

[Speaker 2:](#) That's with leader dog. And yeah, so I was going to school to become an elementary school with Central Michigan University. So like we're coming home, one to two weekends a month and then filling my time being a house mom at that time now known as an RA or a resident assistant and got intrigued in our orientation and mobility program as it was starting to evolve our, chief programs and services officer Rod Hanline who's a comms and a GDMI, developed our program and started off with bringing in practicum students from western Michigan University. So we're seeing all of these pre-interns and people traveling along our building with canes, which hadn't happened before. So, engaged in conversation and got interested in orientation and mobility.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Rod Hanline, his work has really been wonderful to read some of the innovations that he's come up with. So that's, a great connection. And when you say G D M I that's guide dog mobility instructor?

[Erica:](#) Correct, yeah, that's the international, title for our instructors who train guide dogs for people who are blind or visually impaired, and then match them up together.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Wonderful. Wonderful. Well we're, we're all learning the language too and want to use the correct terminology. A lot of times people don't even know what comms are, right. Orientation and mobility specialists. So we're throwing some more important acronyms out there. So you've got you, you were working, you, you work in a teacher training program, you became interested not only in

orientation and mobility but in guide dog mobility and this very specific training. Tell us more, where'd you go from there?

[Erica:](#)

I actually, I work very, very closely with our guide dog mobility teams, but I'm just a comms which makes our program very unique at leader dog. We, that we have a separate and distinct orientation and mobility program, for our clients originally seen. Because Rod Hanline, at the time was sitting at, as the director of client services and we were turning away clients for guide dogs because of their lack of orientation and mobility skills. We would say contact your local provider, whether it be a state service or a local nonprofit or agency. And many times we never heard from those clients again.

[Erica:](#)

When, and if they did reapply to our program to receive a guide dog. They talked about experiences of long wait lists, the short amount of time for training that was available to them. So that's when he said, we need to change this. And we came up with our condensed version of orientation and mobility, which has gone through a couple of different name changes from AMP, which was, the accelerated mobility program, to accelerated orientation of mobility. And now we're just calling it ONM at leader dog to be representative of what we're actually doing. And so that there's not confusion in that, clients have to want a dog to participate in the program. They can just come in for cane training if that's what they really desire.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#)

So it sounds like that this program evolved because of a real need and a gap in services in our field, that people were coming without sufficient orientation and mobility skills, which is happening at a lot of programs across the country as we know. But then to meet that need, you can't just say you were finding, you'd send people back and they couldn't, they didn't come back to you or they couldn't find what they were looking for?

[Erica:](#)

Correct. Correct. That's exactly it. So now we're rather than turning people away for lack of ONM skills, we're able to offer them if, they've originally applied for a guide dog or they can apply it specifically to our ONM program and we can offer them, would you like to come here for five intensive days, one on one with an ONM instructor working towards your goal of being a, more safe and independent traveler in whatever way, shape or form you would like that to be? We can really talk through, a lot of, what guide dog travel really looks like because for many people there's just a lack of understanding of all that's involved in that.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#)

Sure, sure. And so walk us through, take us, take us with you. Let's pretend like we are one of those clients who, maybe we've had a little bit of orientation mobility. Maybe we live in a rural environment or somewhere that's a, it's a little bit harder to get the services and we're not sure if we want a dog guide. We are thinking about it seriously, but we need the skills. We need the ONM skills. So what does our programming look like as we come to you? Just walk us through it.

[Erica:](#) Sure. So a person entering our orientation and mobility program at leader dog would be arriving, on a Sunday night and meet their ONM instructor Monday morning. And that's what we really do. At first we just sit down and get to know the person and talk about goals and what their vision looks like for them in regards to their vision as a traveler and then their, remaining vision and how they're using it, how stable is it, et cetera. From there, within the first day we're working on, excuse me, indoor orientation skills, introducing a cane sometimes for the very first time, to, to that client and progressing to residential travel skills generally bought all within the first day of training.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Okay. So a lot of is a lot of intensity and just all individually tailored to the person to, how they're using their vision, remaining vision if they have any and how their, their goals, their personal goals, what they want to work on.

[Erica:](#) Correct. Correct. Progressing through our week of, of training together with a minimum of five hours of intensive training to upwards of seven depending on that person, each day and then progressing through a variety of environments because, we know that somebody's home environment may be a particular way, but we're trying to create generalized skills for multiple environments. You know what we find when people are empowered with independent travel skills, they want to explore not just what's familiar, but they might want to explore that next block or the next town or what happens when they move. So being prepared for that in addition, if they're interested in receiving a dog, as a guide dog from leader dogs for the blind or any program, all of those programs, excuse me, are tailored to meet somebody specific needs, but also, everybody received generalized training in several environments. We have to adapt skills and be ready for that.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) You know, you bring up a really good point. And it's also the goal of orientation and mobility is not just to train to only specific environments and where the client or young adult or students is living. But to have those, that's really a strength of a person coming to leader dog campus and going through that process is it's, it's also forcing that cognitive mapping to happen, right. And a different, different environment and that those skills really can become, these are generalized indoor, travel skills. These are broadly based residential principles that you need to know for residential neighborhood travel. You know, and how does that look in these different environments? It sounds like it's a nice opportunity for clients and for students.

[Erica:](#) I would agree. We can, our environment here, is in very close proximity to our, residential campus and training facility, we're able to get to, multiple environments to meet a multitude of objectives for that client.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) That sounds perfect. That sounds perfect. And so the use of public transportation, the use of different transportation modalities is available as a part of that?

[Erica:](#) You know, interesting. You should bring that up because being in southeast Michigan, known as the motor city capitol of the world, in the majority of our area, public transportation is not that easy to find. In fact, our city that leader Dodge has, is in, has opted out of the public transportation within the Tri County area, so for clients are and would be using public transportation. Again, it's a generalized skill because we all know that public transportation varies from city to city and place to place. So we are able to get to local places, or not local but a little bit further destinations to practice some of those skills. If, that's a goal that a client wants to work at or at least hook them up with the resources of their public transportation when they get home. Because many places do have travel instructors or ADA, folks that can help them to, to match, the transportation with their needs.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) That sounds great. That sounds really smart and useful in someone's life. You know, those connections. It's, so that's great to know that that's a part of the, services and supports that your agency offers. Now, shifting gears as they go through this five days of instruction, what, what's next after they go back, like you said, there's this, this network and maybe someone helps them get connected to other services, other transportation opportunities, what does it look like when someone leaves after five days?

[Erica:](#) Sure. So we, at the end of our training, our, well throughout training we're having open and honest conversation with the progression of the skills and what someone needs to be thinking about, when they're getting home to keep up their skills. But at the end of training, we sit down and have a really good, rigorous conversation about practice and resources and how clients can use family or friends if they can't find a, a [inaudible 00:14:57] in their home environment to help them to continue to be successful. Sometimes that means that we're taking a video of the client, traveling with their new abilities, here before they leave. Sometimes that means having a phone call, with a family member. And sometimes that means, coaching our clients to be able to have those conversations with family members and friends when they get home and becoming their own best advocate for their future goals.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) So really you've seen situations where it's worked and where it hasn't worked maybe with families and friends supporting. So could you, without, obviously not sharing any names or any specifics, but give it, give us an example of when that's working. What does that look like? Like you said, there's could be a video shared or a conversation. What is a family member or a friend and a client partnership look like when it's going really well,

[Erica:](#) when it's going really well, what that family member or a friend is able to do is be there for that client in a way that they're only intervening when the client truly needs support. We all know that that's probably the hardest part of our job. But the client again becomes their own best advocate. And for the last five days, my instructor was close at first and then backed up within, you know, a distance that we can intervene if needed. And coming up with whatever cue or

clue they need to be able to practice to do that. So possibly starting out with human guide going around the block, and then the client coaching that person through, how they know where they are and then saying, now watch me do it even if it's just to the end of the block and back home. Breaking it down into simple steps.

[Erica:](#) So I always like to have the conversation with my clients when they leave here. When you land at home, I know you're going to be tired from a long travel day, but I want you to think about one thing that you're going to do to continue on this journey to progress your skills. And then I want you to think about the next day where that's going to progress too. So whether it's teaching that family member or a friend, how to do, like I said, human guide or showing them their new team technique? Just one simple thing each day. Reserving that chunk of time out for themselves to add to be their own best advocate on their journey to meeting their travel goal.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Okay. Well tell me the flip side. What if it's not working, what does it look like when it's not working or when maybe you know, the person doesn't completely understand or a family that's maybe well meaning, doesn't take on the role that they should?

[Erica:](#) Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head there, Amy is that, you know, family members and friends are so well meaning but can intervene just sometimes too much. And it's so hard to see somebody struggle. But that struggling is where that problem solving is developing. And what we've worked so hard for during our, ONM training is for the person to start to develop, that they know when they need to ask for help. So a little bit of struggle is good. So, where it really falls apart is when the goal is, well I'll do it tomorrow, or I'll do it the next day. So we really just try to make that first goal, something very, very achievable.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) That sounds really smart and I think you're getting to the whole ecology, the whole ecological system around the person, that it's not just the person, it's this person that's living around and interacting with people. Right? And in a geographical sense, what's the, maybe the furthest type of client that you'll have come to leader dogs? Like from, is it from a different place in the country or maybe even in the world? Or how far away do folks to come to?

[Erica:](#) So for our ONM program, we accept and work with clients, from anywhere in the US and Canada. As far as our guide dog training program goes. We have clients, excuse me, from Spain, several times throughout the year through our affiliation with Lions Clubs International. We also have clients that come from, South and Central America, multiple times a year. So we're serving about 40 clients and our guide dog program every single year.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Wow, that's exciting. And if, if you need to take a minute, it's okay. If you need to take a minute for going on mute or whatever, we can do that. It's that time of year. You've just experienced the polar vortex and you're in the middle of

Michigan Winter, which is going up and down. Speaking of the polar vortex that before, before we started this podcast, Eric and I were just talking about the freezing cold temperatures or maybe weather extreme and how leader dog handles that kind of situation and how, do you promote safety and care for the dog of course as well as care for the person. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[Erica:](#)

Sure, sure. So, our team members, when it comes to horribly increment weather days, we are classified into essential team members and nonessential team members. So essential team members are those that are working directly with a client who, no matter what, we, need bodies here to continue the, process are our clients give us a chunk of time of their life that we have to take an advantage of. We don't know if we're ever going to get that time back. So we're going to utilize it as much as possible. And on the, on the flip side, we have essential team members that are also continuing to care for the dogs essential needs, on a reduced staff of course, when the weather is, horribly bad because we don't want to go out in it so our dogs can't, either, for health reasons in general. So in regard to our ONM training for the polar vortex, we utilized indoor environments to an extreme. There is one million and one lessons that you can have in a mall or in a, big box store like a Walmart or a Target, and we really took full advantage those, almost negative 40, feels like days that we had last week.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#)

Very cool. Well, I'm really intrigued with the program at leader dog and one of the things that intrigues me, and I know we're just going to talk about it, just a sliver is leader dog is known as an agency that serves individuals who are deaf, blind, as well as those who are blind. And it's kind of what you're known for because it is a rarer population and it is a different type of mobility. Now I know just myself that the program generally is longer for someone who is deaf and blind who comes to leader dog, that they have a little bit of a longer programming session. Can you speak to anything else about the uniqueness of that aspect in your program?

[Erica:](#)

Sure. So our, client to instructor ratio is reduced. Our instructors in that program are all fluent in ASL, so it takes out the, the, middle interpreter if you will. So going right to the source, client to instructor, which is very nice. We do utilize, other resources to help, our instructors, for example, when it's lecture time or, social activities to, let them have a little bit of a break too. But it's unique, uh, specifically in that way.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#)

Very nice. Very nice. Yes. That direct instruction is so important. So you have comms on staff who are fluent in American sign language as well as GDMI's as well?

[Erica:](#)

Well just actually our GDMI's at this time.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#)

Okay. Okay. Okay, great. Well, hopefully in our programming at Portland state, we will have some comms who are coming through. Some people come to us

that already are fluent in sign language and are very interested obviously in working with adults and youth who are deaf blind.

[Erica:](#) Sure. Sounds awesome.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Yes, well we, we believe in the diversity and meeting the diverse needs through our program too. And of course you have Seattle and our region, which is big deaf blind community region. Erica, before we close, is there a range of clients ages that you can give us? What's the youngest clients that you take on and then they'd be what's kind of the upper end of, clients? Can you talk a little about that?

[Erica:](#) Sure. We, the, the lower end range is 16. We are serving clients at 16 years of age for any of our leader dog programs. Be it our ONM program, our summer experience camp or our guide dog program. Each are handled in some, unique different cases. But as far as the upper age range goes, it really just depends on the person's abilities. When it comes down to it, do they have the physical ability to walk 30 minutes sustained multiple times a day? If the answer is yes, then no upper age range. We've had clients who have received their first guide dog at 90 plus and we've had returning clients who has had guide dogs throughout their life receive a successor dog in their nineties as well. and for our ONM program again, same as long as they're able to get out there and physically get moving with us, then we'll make the program an option for them.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) And is the youngest still for the ONM program 16?

[Erica:](#) Yes. You know, we really stress that we understand that age range is part of the school age population. So when we do have that age range come in, it's not a one and done and it's not a one and done for anybody. ONM is a lifelong journey that we need to revisit when things change, whether it's our vision and the environment, hearing multitude of reasons. But we, want to work in collaboration with the comms that is working through the school district or what have you with that child.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) Sounds great. Well, before we close today. I just wanted to thank you again for spending some time with us, and sharing your work with us. And I would ask you a couple of things. One is what do you love about your job and what advice did you have for the students who are in the orientation and mobility program right now?

[Erica:](#) So what I love about my job is that I'm able to make a difference every day in somebody's life, whether it's through education of skills required to be an independent traveler, whatever tool somebody chooses and helping somebody get to the next step of their journey. My advice is to be open, in regard to where do you think you might land? I started my career as thinking that I was going to work with early elementary school kids. And here I am with, an adult

population. So be open for those avenues and those, career choice moves. It's a, it's an awesome field with many, many possibilities.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) It's surely is and that's a great way to inspire people is to stay open to their own learning journeys and what they've learned. Erica, thank you so much for making some time for us today. I hope, your cold gets better, stay warm, and take lots of vitamin C as you work through those Michigan winters. And thank you for the work that you do and the leader that you are in our field.

[Erica:](#) Thank you so much for your time and everyone else's time.

[Dr. Amy Parker:](#) All right, have a wonderful day. Bye Bye.